

Puritan Values

Puritan beliefs were filled with paradoxes. The puritans rebelled against others to create the perfect world, a utopia that did not allow for rebellion. Man was not to sin, but he would sin anyway. Man was required to forgive, but evil was ever present. Man was a seeker of salvation, but was helpless against evil. He was to live in hopes of eternal salvation, but he may not have been predetermined by God for salvation.

John Calvin established their basic beliefs of original sin, predestination and the belief that Jesus Christ died for man's sins. Their belief of original sin is that Eve led Adam to sin, and that sin tainted all of mankind, and their concept predestination is that select individuals have been determined by God for salvation before their birth.

Puritans valued the family as the basic and permanent human institution. They permitted no divorce except for abandonment although they would allow an annulment because of infertility. They saw marriage as a civil rather than religious custom. Puritans arranged marriages for their children and no one could marry outside the church. A girl could veto a choice but no one expected her to use the right. Love meant physically caring for someone so romance was unnecessary for marriage.

In spite of popular mythology, the Puritans respected a healthy sexuality and human sexual relationships as normal unless they became obsessive. They punished illegitimacy albeit gently—fornicators were usually publically whipped. When a girl conceived out of wedlock, Puritans generally tried to establish a family. These pregnancies often resulted from the Puritans' curious custom of "bundling." Bundling allowed a courting couple to sleep together in the girl's home provided they were individually bundled. While the Puritans appeared to take a looser position on fornication, they more severely punished adultery and they executed homosexuals.

They wanted to "purify" the Church of England and put an end to the hierarchy that led to corruption. They believed that the church should follow the scriptures exactly. There was a dislike of the Pope's practice of selling indulgences and the massive ornamentation of the Church.

The puritans were just normal people, they were not supermen. They were not monks; they did not shrink from life. The puritans were also neither prohibitionists, nor sexual prudes. In the Puritan discipline, dancing was acceptable, but sexual dancing was not. Drinking alcohol was also acceptable but becoming a drunkard was not. They were very open minded for the time. They had the view that they had to live in the world, but not become worldly.

The Dilemma of Puritan living affected individual puritans differently. Some went about their daily lives living in uncertainty whether God had selected them for eternal salvation or condemned them to eternal damnation. Tensions must have been tough on those who worked hard for success but under the Puritan doctrine never daring to enjoy their wealth and success.

The Puritans had a strong belief in the supernatural and in the existence of Satan. They believed that the devil was loose in Massachusetts. The powerful minister Cotton Mather firmly believed that the Devil was real, and that evil forces were present in the community. He gave weekly sermons about the existence of Satan and how satanic forces were at work seducing God fearing people from their righteous path.

There is an unsupported myth about the causes of the witch hysteria. In the 17th Century there was a belief that the church leaders wanted to create a frenzy to establish powerful leaders. However, this theory is flawed in that the ministers were already the most influential people in the community. On the other hand, the Puritan economy was declining as was the religious doctrine. It could have been the ministers' desire to deflect attention away from poor economic and social leadership by the activity and concern concomitant to a major witchcraft trial.

The first to make fraudulent accusations of witchcraft were young girls who, for whatever reason, wanted to destroy someone else. Accusing someone they did not like of practicing "Black Arts" brought these girls to the center of attention. It was an easy accusation to make, impossible to refute and acceptable to the

community. It had the further lure of allowing these girls to do and say things they would not otherwise be allowed to do and say under the restrictive Puritanical code.

The clergy of the time wrote a great deal of material on the subject of witchcraft. The congregations trusted their ministers, and learned to believe in witchcraft. Without this belief the outbreak would have been impossible. This created an atmosphere of concern over demonic possession of the individual.

There were those who believed that they had the power of Satan, that they were possessed. Poor souls tired of their dull lives, wanting to be thought of as special persons, they would "confess" to witchcraft for a moment of glory.

It was the teenage girls however, hungry for the center of attention, that whipped the interest in witchcraft into hysteria. Enjoying their sudden notoriety they pointed out the eccentric relying on prejudice and bias against those "different" in whatever way, from the town and country folk to carry the frenzy into bloodshed. Commonly the accuser knew the witch or warlock. Mostly they were both from the same village. They were normally close and even may have been family members. The basis for some of the hysteria could represent domestic squabbles.

Perhaps the main cause of why the hysteria occurred when it did was the social tension created by the decline in the economy, and of puritan beliefs. The Puritans were fearful that their special covenant with God was failing. In 1684 England revoked their charter, and in 1686 all colonies of New England became a Dominion (the Dominion of New England). Sir Edmund Andros became the royal appointed governor. Andros reorganized the company. He disrupted the political and religious structure with an iron hand. In 1691, after the Glorious revolution of 1688, he was sent back and the charter was reestablished, but the damage had been done. The colony was worried and social tensions increased. In addition, there such problems as a series of harsh winters, a smallpox epidemic, hostile Indian tribes, the nearby French, and sweeping changes in the English royal government.

The Puritans were fearful of God's wrath for their failures and of their religious decay. They believed that Satan may have entered at this time of faulting.

The importance of witchcraft hysteria today is that when social tensions increase, society will create "witches" or scapegoats. Basically the creation of "witches" to explain life's misfortunes and allows one to escape the consequences of his/her own actions. It exerts social control and releases tensions in the community by allowing people to vent their frustrations on those most ill-equipped to fight back and relieves the societal leaders, in the case of the Puritans, the ministers, from dealing with the problems facing them as leaders.

There are several reasons for the decline of the Puritans. The Puritan way of life was very demanding. It became impossible for successive generations to go on sustaining concern for religious experiment. After two and three generations less members became caught up in the holy society. By the third generation Puritan leaders began to lose their tight grip on the religious society. Puritans became victims of their own dilemma; they were unable to live under their own religious zeal. In the 1660's membership declined and the churches became threatened. The conflicts within the puritan society had caught up with them. The experience of American living had taken the edge off the zeal of the first generation. By 1700 the leaders had lost control and the religious experiment was dead.

Ironically it was the Puritans' own success that helped their fall. Economic success and the building of a society was at the heart of the puritan work ethic. The acceptance of economic success allowed for religion to become lax. Business soon became of greater importance than religion. Economic achievement replaces the need for the holy experiment. Their own religion promoted economic success (the protestant work ethic).

The difficulty in maintaining the high pitch of fervor that the first generations had also helped the fall of the Puritans. Trying to live with such pressures such as original sin, predestination, and living in moderation proved to be more than the puritans could handle. Intolerance was also a factor in the fall of puritanism. It demanded a standardized way of thinking that was not compatible with their growing

society. Even with rigid intolerance, non-Puritans influenced the puritan society and was the last feature of its downfall.

The puritans made contributions to American society that exists today. One of which is the continuing need and desire for economic success with its greater emphasis on the work ethic and social status. In many circumstances modern American society is as intolerant and paranoid as that of the early puritans. The hellfire and brimstone spouting televangelists are the direct descendants of the puritan ministers. The highly moralistic demands and standardized value systems preached today prey on the same fears and insecurities of those in the 1600's. In addition, America has a very strong feeling of superiority which has its foundation in the puritan movement.

The puritans believed in self-determination, that each has the ability to do well. That view exists today. They also stressed education and the desire to reform by education and good works are the heart of American democracy.